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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD AND G/IWI

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SUBJECT: UAE WOMEN SHATTERING STEREOTYPES

Sensitive but unclassified.

11. (U) Summary: The UAE takes pride in noting that the prominent roles women play in UAE society defy traditional stereotypes of women in the Arab world. A series of recent appointments of women to high profile positions is seen as testaments to progressiveness of the country's leadership as well as attempts to normalize women's presence in more aspects of Emirati society. With the first ever appointment of female ambassadors, women making their way in national politics, and women defying the roles traditionally prescribed to them in business, today's UAE women face choices starkly different from their mothers a generation ago when the country was born. That said, they also face some societal barriers quite familiar to their aunts and grandmothers. End summary.

UAEG report reminds of female progress

12. (U) A report on women in the UAE, just released by the government, highlights the progress women have made in the country. In the words of the authors, "The report stems out of a conviction that the women of the UAE are truly a success story to be celebrated. Despite the many preconceptions and stereotypes with regards to women in the Arab world, the lives of women in the UAE illustrate that such stereotypes do not necessarily apply in this country." The successes of women have also been highlighted in a media campaign.

13. (U) One of the most revealing statistics regarding women's progress is in academic achievements. Women in the UAE constitute 70% of the country's university graduates (from domestic universities in the UAE). In fact, according to the 2008 UAE Yearbook, only 29 Emirati women between the ages of 25 and 29 held university degrees 30 years ago -- today, 16,100 (out of approximately 41,000) women in the same age group are university graduates, and those figures are rising by the year. Although universities remain segregated along gender lines, women are actively encouraged to pursue academic achievement with no restrictions on their courses of study. 2008 has seen Emirati women blazing trails into traditionally male dominated fields like flying -- this year, the UAE produced both a female Boeing pilot and a female Airbus pilot. In sports, another male dominated arena, the UAE sent female athletes, including Maitha Al Maktoum, the daughter of the Crown Prince of Dubai, to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In line with the country's growing prominence on the financial stage, women contributed AED 25 billion (USD 6.8 billion) in investments to the UAE economy.

Two female ambassadors -- a UAE first

14. (U) On September 15, the first two female ambassadors in the country's history were appointed: Dr. Hissa Abdallah Al Otaibah, a PhD in Business Management, is the new Ambassador to Spain and Sheikha Najla Mohammed Salem Al Qassimi, a career diplomat (since 2002), is the newly appointed Ambassador to Sweden. At a Ramadan evening event hosted by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed on September 16, the day after the appointments were announced, EmbOffs observed that women attending the event were abuzz over the new appointments. Sheikha Al Qassimi made a positive impression on those

around her, including Minister of State Reem al-Hashemi, a recent addition to the cabinet and broadly respected for her contribution. The following night one participant excitedly recalled that she had stayed up talking late into the night at the palace with the new ambassadorial appointee, who was clearly seen as yet another pioneer in the UAE's march towards greater female participation. In fact, the number of women at this traditionally male event (a lecture followed by a late evening meal) was another indication of the inroads being made in Emirati society. At another Ramadan event on September 24, EmbOffs found the buzz surrounding Ambassador Al Qassimi's appointment had far from abated, with women still excitedly expressing their genuine delight and pride at her appointment. In one indication of shifting societal norms, al Qassimi told EmbOff that her own mother had been "shocked" by her appointment, only recognizing the honor when the congratulations poured in.

Building on prior progress

¶5. (U) Women had started making their way in the public sector even before the appointment of the two ambassadors. In 2006, Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi, elected by the Electoral College of Abu Dhabi, became the first woman in UAE history to win a seat on the 40-member Federal National Council (FNC). The government also nominated eight other women to the FNC. The UAE prides itself on the fact that the appointment of these women translates to a 22.5 percent share of parliamentary seats, which exceeds the world average of 17 percent female representation in similar chambers. On February 17, two women, Reem Ibrahim Al Hashemi and Dr. Maitha Salem Al Shamsi, were appointed as government ministers (each a Minister of State without portfolio), bringing the total number of female government ministers to four. While the Federal Judicial Authority previously prohibited

ABU DHABI 00001124 002 OF 002

women from working as judges or public prosecutors, in January, Dubai appointed its first female judge and in March, Abu Dhabi followed suit. These appointments in the two largest emirates are seen as precursors to an amendment to the Federal law.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Some would argue that the appointments of female ambassadors, ministers, judges and FNC members are superficial forms of affirmative action. Optics are no doubt a key factor, but the UAE leadership also seems to grasp the need to normalize the participation of women in the development of society. Demographics in a country where the UAE national population is under 20% of total residents makes it imperative that the female half of that local population be encouraged to participate -- especially in government positions which call for citizenship as a criteria for employment. With such a small pool, more nationals are also needed in the work force generally. Encouraging employment for the spouses of resident expatriates also injects more personnel into the labor market without increasing the number of foreign families. Women offered the creative outlet of meaningful employment bring a valuable perspective into the marketplace that has clear economic benefits. Surprise expressed by foreigners at the strides that women have made in the country is often met with amusement by young Emirati women for whom the rising status of women is increasingly normal.

¶7. (SBU) Comment continued: Time will tell whether the increased prominence of women has staying power and will continue to expand into decision making circles in more walks of life. Women have no expectation of competing with the rulers of the various emirates in a society in which the ruler has the final say. Women still face societal and legal challenges in combating domestic abuse, transmitting citizenship to their children, inheritance rights, freedom to marry non-Muslims, and (in some families) foreign travel without the consent of male relatives. Many women find promotions hard to come by in their companies (although some have taken over family businesses in the absence of a brother to assume that role). Time will also tell how newfound roles may alter the national identity -- and the family roles of women who find it harder to fit marriage into their plans. More unmarried women would mean less future Emirati nationals to staff the work force. End comment.

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